Central Yavapai Fire District/Prescott Fire Department CULTURAL ASSESSEMENT

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An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

ABSTRACT

For years the Central Yavapai Fire District and the Prescott Fire Department have been working to consolidate many of their functional programs. As the two departments worked closer together, it became obvious that, at some point, a total consolidation would be beneficial. With this realization, the challenge of conflicting cultures also became obvious.

The purpose of this research was to examine the cultural differences between the two departments and the effect of these differences in the event of total consolidation of the departments. Descriptive research was used, in the form of a survey, to assess the beliefs of the employees of both departments through the use of a survey.

The research questions addressed in this project were:

- 1. Are there major differences in the employees' current beliefs about their organizations and how they operate?
- What obstacles would need to be overcome to achieve the desired department culture once the two departments have consolidated?
- 3. How do we manage the change in cultures during the transition?

Management literature was examined in order to develop an organizational strategy to deal with the conflict created by pending consolidation. The literature review revealed that,

although consolidation may be proven to be a benefit for the organizations involved, consolidating two distinct cultures may be much more difficult than consolidating the functional aspects of the organizations.

An organizational culture assessment of both departments' employees was conducted through the administering of a survey questionnaire. The survey revealed that the differences between the two departments' cultures were not significant.

At the conclusion of this project recommendations were made for the leaders of the organizations to work out their differences through a process of self-facilitation. The departments' leaders must prepare themselves for the consolidation and must be united in the direction to be taken. It was further recommended that the channels of communication be maintained and that all stakeholders be kept informed of progress as well as challenges. Clear direction and specific goals must be set and communicated to all involved. The human aspect of consolidation was cited as a key element in the success of the consolidation effort.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	.GE
Abstract	. ∠
Table of Contents	. 4
Introduction	. 5
Background and Significance	. 7
Literature Review	10
Procedures	13
Results	15
Discussion	20
Recommendations	22
References	24

INTRODUCTION

For the past several years, the Central Yavapai Fire
District and the Prescott Fire Department have been working on a
series of consolidations of various department functions. Among
the functions already consolidated are Dispatch, Training, Fleet
Maintenance, Station Manning, Standard Operating Procedures, and
Automatic Aid. The financial benefits of these consolidated
functions have been obvious in the form of improved service for
the citizens and cost avoidance or cost savings for both
departments.

As the departments' staffs considered consolidating other functions and programs, a total consolidation of the two departments became an obvious possibility. However, as employees saw the departments moving towards total consolidation, many began worrying about what would happen to their original organization and what effect the change would have on them personally.

At this point, an obvious concern was that there were some very definite differences in the departments' cultures, which would affect any plans for total consolidation. The main concern is that the employees are proud of their prospective departments and have very definite ownership into their department's values, methods, and philosophies. It also became obvious that neither group was eager to change.

The purpose of this research is to examine the cultural differences between the two departments and the effects these differences would have in the event of total consolidation of the departments.

The research questions addressed in this project are:

- 1. Are there major differences in the employees' current beliefs about their organizations and how they operate?
- 2. What obstacles would need to be overcome to achieve the desired department culture once the two departments have consolidated?
- 3. How do we manage the change in cultures during the transition to one department?

Descriptive research was used to assess the beliefs of the employees of both departments through the use of an organizational cultural assessment questionnaire.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Central Yavapai Fire District and the Prescott Fire

Department are neighboring fire departments that have been

working together to protect the citizens of Central Yavapai

County for several years. Over the years, their cooperation has

grown from a simple mutual aid agreement, which had to be

formally activated when needed, to one which involves

functionally consolidated programs, procedures, and functions.

The efforts of the two departments have produced some definite

successes and even a few failures.

The current functional consolidations include a dispatch center which provides communications for both departments, as well as three other neighboring departments; a joint fleet maintenance program; a joint training center and training programs; joint policies, procedures, and job descriptions; joint manning of fire stations; and an automatic aid program which responds the closest unit to an emergency regardless of jurisdiction. The staffs of both departments have also investigated consolidating fire prevention and code enforcement activities, executive staff personnel, wages and benefits, and department funding mechanisms.

In 1996, the Prescott City Council and the Board of
Directors of the Central Yavapai Fire District appointed several
task forces to research further consolidation issues. The

issues studied fell into four major areas including; a comparison of benefits and compensation, a study of the possible consolidation of the fire prevention divisions, a comparison and possible consolidation of policies and procedures, and a study of the consolidated deployment of resources to include station locations, apparatus placement, and personnel assignments.

A result of these task forces indicated that a difference in cultures existed. Additionally, it became apparent that employees were ingrained in their cultures and were unwilling to change for various reasons. A common reason appeared to be the uncertainty of what those changes would bring. A consensus of the employees determined that the idea of total consolidation was a sound one; however, the fear of a potential loss of their prospective departments' organizational power and identity created a major barrier. This fear not only reduced the effectiveness of some of the consolidated programs, it also slowed or prevented progress in the consolidation efforts.

Although none of the currently consolidated programs have been discontinued, progress towards total consolidation has all but completely stalled. It is hoped that the results of this research will provide a basis for the development of a strategy to renew progress towards the total consolidation of the two departments.

This research project was prepared to satisfy the requirement for an applied research project associated with the Strategic Management of Change course at the National Fire Academy. This research relates to Module 5, "Personal Aspects of Change Management" in the Strategic Management of Change course. This module addresses human reactions to change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the relevant literature indicates that for years organizations across the country have looked to consolidations (or mergers) as a way to cut costs and become more efficient. For decades, private corporations have courted and devoured one another in the endless pursuit of growth and profit (Greengard, 1997). Similarly, public organizations have consolidated out of the need to become more efficient, due to shrinking tax dollars.

Fire departments serving neighboring growing communities often find that as their cities grow closer and closer together and as their border lines become blurred, the rationale behind having individual fire departments is threatened (Wagner, 1996). That spells fear for fire department personnel: fear of the future, fear of losing their identity, and fear of losing control. As many organizations (both public and private) have found, it may be easier to get together than to get along (Schonfeld, 1997).

In 1995 when Abbey Healthcare and the Homedco Group merged to form the Apria Healthcare Group, the problems of joining the two cultures became painfully apparent. Apria managers envisioned a future of robust growth due to the much larger company's ability to dominate the home health care industry. However, the chaos caused by joining two distinct cultures has

been considerable, as the ill will between the Abbey and Homedco people compounded the company's difficulties. Much of the fallout in the Apria merger has been caused by the cultural mismatch between the entrepreneurial Abbey and the strait-laced Homedco (Schonfeld, 1997).

Similarly, the merger of the Wells Fargo and First

Interstate banks met with considerable resistance. Issues such as the drastically different ways the two companies handled work and decision making, and the struggle to streamline benefits and compensation were major obstacles. The issue was not that one system was necessarily better than the other. The issue was merely the way the two companies operated, based largely on their business needs (Greengard, 1997).

The problems encountered by the consolidation efforts of the Prescott Fire Department and the Central Yavapai Fire District exemplify how difficult a merger can be. As the two departments came closer together, the differences in cultures became more apparent and began to slow progress in the consolidation process. Consolidation consultants Jeff Johnson and Jack Snook have identified this stumbling block in the consolidation process as "the stall." The stall refers to the point in a fire department consolidation where the progress just stops (Wagner, 1996). It appears that the Prescott Fire Department and Central Yavapai Fire District consolidation

efforts have stalled due to the differences in cultures.

Identifying these differences and developing a strategy for overcoming the differences is essential at this stage of the consolidation efforts. "Having clear direction and knowing what you are trying to accomplish will help you reach your objectives (Wagner, 1996)."

The main theme found in the literature research is that consolidation is a long and ongoing process. Deadlines and objectives can be set, but it takes time to evolve. The key to successful mergers is understanding the costs associated with the deal and how to make the organizations function efficiently once people and resources are combined (Greengard, 1997).

PROCEDURES

This research project consisted of both historical and descriptive research methodologies. Initially, the author conducted a search of the existing literature utilizing the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center and the Yavapai Community College Library.

Additionally, the author conducted an organizational cultural assessment survey of the employees of both the Prescott Fire Department and Central Yavapai Fire District in an attempt to assess the beliefs of the employees and develop a strategy for overcoming the cultural differences. Organizational cultural assessment questionnaires were obtained from Professor William Rosenbach of Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. The questionnaire was designed to measure the ways that people in organizations think and act. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify a general consensus of ideas and beliefs that people within each department share and how it affects their behavior. A copy of the questionnaire and the summarized results can be found in Appendix A.

The questionnaires were distributed to both full- and parttime employees of both departments. A total of 145
questionnaires were distributed with only 123 being returned.
The questionnaires were coded to identify the Prescott Fire
Department respondents as one group with the other four groups

being comprised of Central Yavapai Fire District employees. The four smaller groups of Central Yavapai Fire District employees were identified in an effort to determine if major differences existed between these particular groups. The Central Yavapai Fire District groups included: the Fire Suppression group that consisted of fire suppression personnel including the battalion chiefs; the Dispatch group which included only personnel in the dispatch section; the Support group which included all administrative, risk management, and fleet maintenance; and the Reserve group which included all reserve firefighters which are part-time personnel.

The support of both departments' fire chiefs was requested prior to conducting the research. The questionnaires were distributed to the supervisors of both departments at a joint staff meeting along with an explanation of the purpose for the survey and the procedures to be followed. The supervisors were responsible for distributing the surveys to the personnel within their work groups only and for returning the completed surveys to the author by the imposed deadline. This procedure was intended to keep the coded questionnaires from being distributed to personnel outside of their group. Upon conclusion of the survey, the questionnaires were collected and mailed to Professor Rosenbach for evaluation.

RESULTS

The historical research conducted for this project indicated that although consolidations (or mergers) of organizations can be beneficial, the challenges of combining cultures can be extremely difficult and risky. Issues such as benefits and compensation, methods of operating and decision-making, and differing management philosophies can demoralize employees and devastate merged organizations.

The historical background between Prescott Fire Department and the Central Yavapai Fire District indicated that many of the same obstacles, which were identified as needing to be overcome, had also been identified in the literature review. This essentially helped to answer the second research question, "What obstacles would need to be overcome to achieve the desired department culture once the two departments have consolidated?" The major obstacles appeared to be the employees' fear of the future and fear of their prospective organizations losing their identity and control.

The historical research suggested several ways of managing the change in cultures for private as well as public organizations. However, there were some common suggestions for both types of organizations. The suggestions helped to answer the research question, "How do we manage the change in cultures during the transition to one department?" The suggestions

included: understanding each organization's workforce and the culture that surrounds them; maintaining open channels of communications and keeping all of the stakeholders informed; having clear direction and setting solid goals; and understanding that the human side of the consolidation or merger is a key element in it's success or failure.

After conducting the descriptive research and reviewing the results of the survey, it became apparent that the survey would be limited by the way the groups had been divided. The respondents had not been surveyed as groups that could be easily compared. The Prescott Fire Department respondents had all been grouped together, and the Central Yavapai Fire District respondents had been divided into four smaller groups. This created the problem of not being able to directly compare the results of the Prescott Fire Department respondents to the Central Yavapai Fire District respondents because the Central Yavapai Fire District respondents had been grouped into smaller work groups which did not correspond to the Prescott Fire Department group.

The answers in the survey allowed the respondents to rate how true the statements were as related to the largest part of the organization with which they would normally be in contact. With a scale of one to five, the higher the number of the

response, the less the respondent felt the statement was true; therefore, the more negative the response.

TABLE 1

	Central Yavapai Suppression	Prescott Fire Department	Central Yavapai Dispatch	Central Yavapai Support	Central Yavapai Reserves
Managing Change	19.8	19.2	22.5	20.3	21.7
Achieving Goals	22.8	22.3	23.3	23.2	24.7
Coordinated Teamwork	22.8	21.4	23.0	21.4	25.4
Customer Orientation	23.0	22.8	23.8	24.2	25.4
Culture Strength	21.5	20.3	21.7	21.0	22.1
TOTALS	109.9	106.0	116.8	110.1	119.3

When comparing the results of the groups surveyed, the purpose of this study was to determine if there were significant differences between the Prescott Fire Department and Central Yavapai Fire District respondents. The survey indicated that there were no major differences between the beliefs of these two groups. Therefore, the survey answered the research question,

"Are there major differences in the employees' beliefs about their organizations and how they operate?"

As Table 1 indicates, the scores for the Central Yavapai Fire District Reserve respondents were considerably higher than most of the other groups. These respondents are all part-time Central Yavapai Fire District employees hoping to someday become full-time employees. Therefore, it was anticipated that these scores would be significantly different.

In comparing the groups' scores in all of the categories, there were only three categories in which the scores of Central Yavapai Fire District groups varied significantly from the Prescott Fire Department group scores.

In the "Managing Change" category, most of the group scores did not vary significantly. The only scores that varied significantly in this category were those of the Prescott Fire Department group and the Central Yavapai Fire District Support group. Using the questionnaire's response key, the scores appear to indicate that generally the Central Yavapai Fire District Support group did not believe that the statements were true of their organization as much as the Prescott Fire Department group did of their own organization.

The scores in the "Coordinated Teamwork" category also had a significant variation between the Prescott Fire Department group and the Central Yavapai Fire District Support and Dispatch

groups. The scores in this category appear to indicate that generally the Prescott Fire Department group did not believe that the statements were true of their organization as much as the Central Yavapai Fire District groups did of their own organization.

The scores in the "Customer Orientation" category had a significant variation between the Prescott Fire Department group and the Central Yavapai District Dispatch group. With the score being higher for the Central Yavapai Fire District Dispatch group, it appears that this group has a more negative view of their organization's customer orientation.

In the "Achieving Goals" and "Cultural Strength" categories the results of the survey did not vary significantly between any of the Central Yavapai Fire District groups and the Prescott Fire Department group. That would seem to indicate that the groups were generally in agreement about their beliefs of the statements being true about their prospective organizations.

DISCUSSION

The challenges experienced by the Prescott Fire Department and the Central Yavapai Fire District are prime examples of the challenges experienced by most organizations during consolidations (or mergers). Although several of the Prescott Fire and Central Yavapai Fire Department functions had previously been consolidated, none of the consolidations appeared to threaten the employees as much as the issues that were studied by the task forces appointed by the organizations' governing bodies. Much as was described in the literature research, issues such as combining benefits, compensation, policies and procedures and re-deploying personnel created major obstacles for the consolidation of the two departments.

Again, as shown in the study of the Wells Fargo and First Interstate banks merger, it is not necessarily that one system is better than the other, just that they are different. Both departments are already successful in the way they do business. They just handle work and decision making differently, and the benefit and compensation packages are different.

Similarly, employees from both departments began to worry about their future. They worried about losing their jobs, winding up in less-meaningful positions, and the possibility of losing possible avenues of promotions. They worried about one or both departments losing their identities. A major concern

became which department's benefit and compensation package would be utilized upon consolidation.

The purpose of this research and the cultural assessment survey was to examine the cultural differences between the two departments and the effect of those differences in the event of consolidation. The results of the survey seem to indicate that, although differences do exist, the general employee populations of both departments did not perceive major differences in the cultures. The Central Yavapai Fire District Reserve group's results were the only group whose scores were consistently higher than most of the other groups in all of the categories. However, it was felt that these results were not an accurate comparison because as part-time employees, the Central Yavapai Fire District Reserves would view the organizations differently than full-time employees in both departments.

The historical research indicated that setting definite objectives and having a clear direction of what is to be accomplished would help overcome the obstacles experienced during consolidation. Therefore, it appears that, as employees, we lost focus on what Johnson and Snook call the million-dollar question: "What's in the best interest of the people we serve?" Having done this, it appears that we have lost our direction and progress towards consolidation has stalled.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature research conducted for this project suggests that the melding of two organizations and its' cultures will be difficult at best. However, several suggestions were made to increase the probability of a successful consolidation or merger. First of all, would consolidation truly be beneficial for all concerned especially the citizens? If so, the obstacles must be overcome and the idea of total consolidation should be aggressively pursued.

Of utmost importance is the need to understand the organizations' workforces and the cultures that surround them.

One important lesson to be learned is to carefully consider the "human side" of the merger. The transformation of the cultures must be more than cosmetic to ensure the success of the consolidation.

Preparing the organizations for total consolidation and leading the change during the transition will mainly be the responsibility of the organizations' executive officers. It is recommended that the executive officers, as leaders of these organizations, prepare themselves to accept the changes and lead others in that acceptance. If the leaders of the organizations are to provide direction to the employees, they themselves must be united. Therefore, the executive officers must overcome their differences before they can lead others towards total

consolidation of the two departments. It is recommended that the executive officers be instructed in the process of self-facilitation and that this process be utilized to overcome any differences that become evident.

Additionally, the lines of communication must be kept open and all stakeholders must be kept informed. All challenges that are encountered should be honestly and frankly discussed with appropriate solutions recommended. Progress should be celebrated as a step closer to achieving consolidation and should be reported to employees on a regular basis.

A final but equally important recommendation is for the leaders of the organization to provide clear direction and to set specific goals for the consolidation. Employees must be given clear direction and reliable information concerning what is going to occur and why it will occur. It will also be important to remind employees to focus on Johnson and Snook's million-dollar question, "What's in the best interest of the people we serve."

REFERENCES

Greengard, Samuel (1997, April). You're Next. There's No Escaping Merger Mania! Workforce, pp52, 54, 57, 60, 62.

Laabs, Jennifer, J. (1997, May). <u>Bayer's Job-Evaluation</u>

<u>System Models Its New Culture.</u> Workforce, pp3-5.

Schonfeld, Erick (1997, March). <u>Have The Urge To Merge?</u>

<u>You'd Better Think Twice.</u> Fortune, pp114-116.

Wagner, Mary Jo (Winter, 1996). Consolidation. <u>Two Experts</u>

<u>Offer a Positive Approach.</u> National Fire & Rescue, pp21-24.

APPENDIX A

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Pillars of Excellence

USE NO. 2 PLA

INCORRECT MARKS

CORRECT MARK

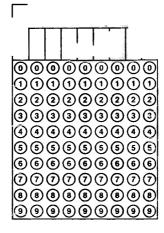


INSTRUCTIONS

This questionnaire measures the ways that people in your organization generally think and act. The questions ask you to describe, as best you can, how people typically behave and the sorts of things they generally believe about the organization and how it operates.

In giving your answers, the term "organization" is used to mean the largest unit or part of the whole organization that you relate to directly in your normal work activities. This might be the entire organization or it might be a division or some other relatively "whole" part of the larger organization. This would *not*, however, normally be a small unit such as a work group; try your best would not with directly think apply to the larger that a property of the organization that you do not with directly you think apply to the *largest* part of the organization that you deal with directly ón a day-to-day basis.

Of course, it is impossible for anyone to know exactly what others think and believe about a wide range of issues; the aim here is to identify a rough, general consensus of ideas and beliefs that people in your organization share and that affect the way they behave. Please be as accurate as possible in describing the behaviors and attitudes of yourself and other members of the organization. There are no right or wrong answers. Your answers should indicate what actually happens as you and others view it, not what you believe should happen or how you think people should see things.



Use the following response key:

1. Completely True: This statement definitely applies to the way people think and act in my organization most or all of the time.

2. Mostly True: This statement applies to the way people think and

act in my organization much of the time.

3. Partly True: This statement applies occasionally to the way

people in my organization think and act.

4. Slightly True: This statement seldom applies to the way people

in my organization think and act.

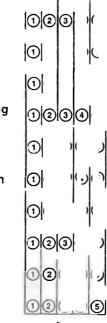
5. Not True: This statement does not apply at all to the way

people in my organization think and act.

4. Slightly True 3. Partly True 2. Mostly True 1. Completely True

In this organization

- 1. people are flexible and adaptable when changes are necessary.
- individuals and teams have clearly defined goals that relate to the goals or mission of the organization.
- 3. teams often lack the authority needed to get the job done effectively.
- we give the highest priority and support to meeting the needs of clients and customers and solving their problems.
- 5. people value and make use of one another's unique strengths and different abilities.
- 6. people feel that most change is the result of pressures imposed from higher up in the organization
- 7. people and teams are often expected to reach goals which they believe are unattainable.
- 8. people believe in teamwork, the "what's in it for us" approach rather than "what's in it for me
- our policies and procedures help us to provide the service our customers and clients want and
- 10. everyone knows and understands our business objectives and priorities.



5. Not True

this c	INCORRECT MARKS CORRECT MARK 4. Sli 3. Partil 2. Mostly T 1. Completely Tr	rue
11.	people have a clear idea of why and how to proceed throughout the process of change.	02346
12.	individuals and teams are measured and rewarded according to how well goals are achieved.	00000
13.	people lack the interpersonal and technical skills they need to work effectively in teams.	00000
14.	people often see customer and client problems as someone else's responsibility.	12349
15.	people sometimes compromise company policies or principles to reach operational goals.	00000
16.	most people believe that change happens too quickly and causes too much disruption.	00000
17.	individuals and teams participate in defining specific goals.	00000
18.	people know what's expected of them and understand their impact on other people, teams, and functions.	12345
19.	people are always looking for new ways to better serve clients and customers.	00345
20.	business decisions are most often made on the basis of facts, not just perceptions or assumptions.	02346
21.	people believe they can influence or affect their work place through their ideas and involvement.	10000
22.	we constantly stretch our goals, to continuously improve.	12345
23.	people believe in working together collaboratively, preferring cooperation over competition.	12345
24.	employees who do the best job of serving customers are more likely than other employees to be recognized or rewarded.	02343
25.	people have access to timely and accurate information about what's really happening in the organization and why.	02346
26.	people believe that their concerns and anxieties during periods of change are heard and taken into consideration.	02345
27.	individuals, teams, and functional areas often have incompatible goals.	02346
28.	managers at all levels work together as a team to achieve results for the organization.	00006
29.	when customers have problems with the products or services they receive, those problems are almost always resolved to their satisfaction.	0000
30.	everyone strongly believes in a set of shared values about how people should work together to solve common problems and reach mutual objectives.	00000

- THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY -

11 – Central Yavapai Fire Suppression

Group Size: 44

	THIS GROUP *	ALL GROUPS *	BEST GROUP
Managing Change	19.2	20.7	22.5
Achieving Goals	22.3	23.3	24.7
Coordinated Teamwork	21.4	23.0	25.4
Customer Orientation	22.8	23.8	25.4
Cultural Strength	20.3	21.7	23.5
Group Total	106.0	112.4	119.3*

12 – Central Yavapai Support

Group Size: 11

	THIS GROUP *	ALL GROUPS *	BEST GROUP
Managing Change	22.5	20.7	22.5
Achieving Goals	23.3	23.3	24.7
Coordinated Teamwork	23.8	23.0	25.4
Customer Orientation	23.7	23.8	25.4
Cultural Strength	23.5	21.7	23.5
Group Total	116.8	112.4	119.3*

13 – Central Yavapai Communications

Group Size: 11

	THIS GROUP *	ALL GROUPS *	BEST GROUP
Managing Change	20.3	20.7	22.5
Achieving Goals	23.2	23.3	24.7
Coordinated Teamwork	21.4	23.0	25.4
Customer Orientation	24.2	23.8	25.4
Cultural Strength	21.0	21.7	23.5
Group Total	110.1	112.4	119.3*

14 – Central Yavapai Reserve

Group Size: 15

	THIS GROUP *	ALL GROUPS *	BEST GROUP
Managing Change	21.7	20.7	22.5
Achieving Goals	24.7	23.3	24.7
Coordinated Teamwork	25.4	23.0	25.4
Customer Orientation	25.4	23.8	25.4
Cultural Strength	22.1	21.7	23.5
Group Total	119.3	12.4	119.3*

01 – Prescott Fire Department

Group Size: 42

	THIS GROUP *	ALL GROUPS *	BEST GROUP
Managing Change	19.8	20.7	22.5
Achieving Goals	22.8	23.3	24.7
Coordinated Teamwork	22.8	23.0	25.4
Customer Orientation	23.0	23.8	25.4
Cultural Strength	21.5	21.7	23.5
Group Total	109.9	112.4	119.3*